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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: January 24, 2008

Bartenstein Unhappy With EU Climate Goals

¶1. Austria's Economics Minister Martin Bartenstein from the OeVP says he is committed to clearly defined climate protection goals. However, he told Austrian radio, he is opposed to the climate guidelines put forward by Brussels, which call for the share of renewable energies to be increased to 34 percent in the Union by ¶2020. That number was far too high, and too unbalanced for Austria, Bartenstein complained, although he emphasized that the country could reach such a goal if necessary. The Minister's main point of criticism, therefore, is that the EU Commission, in setting up these guidelines, had failed to take into account what some EU member states, including Austria, have already done in the area of climate protection. In an interview with ORF radio, Austrian Economics Minister Martin Bartenstein (OeVP) stressed that the EU Commission's goal of a 34-percent share of renewable energies by 2020 "can be done, because it will have to be done, but it is not the goal I'm looking to achieve, as it does not appear to be balanced enough for [Austria]. The Commission has simply lumped together all EU member states, and has failed to take into account the accomplishments of some countries in this area, including Austria," the Minister said. Despite the fact that the current Austrian government in its coalition agreement had pledged to push for a 45-percent share of renewable energies, Bartenstein said he would lobby for a reduction of the Commission's proposed 34 percent in Brussels. "We will make sure our interests are being recognized," he added. Several Austrian newspapers meanwhile focus on the expected costs of the EU's ambitious climate protection plans: "156 Euros climate taxes to be paid by all," reads the front-page headline in mass-circulation tabloid Oesterreich, and liberal daily Der Standard clarifies that this is the expected amount every EU citizen will likely have to pay each year for climate protection measures. Similarly, centrist daily Die Presse says that the Commission's climate proposals will "hit Austria hard. Even Brussels has said that the price for electricity will rise sharply."

Austria Announces Legislation Packet on Sex Offenders

¶2. Austria's government announced that it has reached agreement on a new package of legislation allowing courts to impose job and leisure restrictions on convicted sexual offenders. The government "agreed to a comprehensive packet to protect children and youngsters from sexual violence," Austrian Minister for Justice Maria Berger from the Social Democrats said in a statement. Like several Austrian media, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung and centrist daily Die Presse report on the coalition government's announcement of legislation allowing courts to impose restrictions on convicted

sexual offenders. The draft legislation, which Parliament is expected to pass before summer, will allow courts to bar convicted sexual offenders from taking on a job that involves young children or restrict their leisure activities, such as banning them from playgrounds. In serious cases, such decisions will be compulsory. Proposed by Justice Minister Maria Berger (SPÖ) and Interior Minister Guenther Platter (ÖVP), the draft bill also calls for a sex offenders database, which will keep track of all convicted offenders, recording the charges against them and their current place of residence. Only police and youth services will have access to the database however and a court order will be required to view data on serious offenders, Berger said. The database will classify offenders into two color-coded categories according to the seriousness of their crime. Minor offenders, such as a 16-year-old convicted of having sex with a minor, will be filed in the so-called "yellow database," and will have their records erased after they have served their sentence. All more serious cases will be entered in the "red database," with the files being kept indefinitely, the Presse explains.

Soldiers to Depart For Chad Next Week

13. The Austrian military's humanitarian assistance mission to Chad starts next Tuesday, when Defense Minister Norbert Darabos from the Social Democrats officially sends the contingent on its way. On Wednesday, January 30, an advance team of 15 soldiers departs for the African state. It is in charge of monitoring the situation there and of carrying out preparations for the arrival of the rest of the team. The entire contingent will then be deployed in several phases, and by end February all 165 soldiers should be on site for their mission, according to ORF TV's prime time news Zeit im Bild I on Wednesday.

Gaza Won't Be Humanitarian Crisis, Olmert Says

14. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has said he will not allow people in Gaza to live normal lives as long as southern Israel remains under rocket attacks from Palestinian militants. Olmert also said he would not let Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip turn into a humanitarian crisis. He was speaking after tens of thousands of Palestinians had fled into Egypt yesterday to buy essential supplies after part of the border wall was blasted open. A senior Hamas member has meanwhile called for the border crossing to remain open and Egypt has stressed it will not use force to send the Palestinian back. "Hamas blew up the border," headlines independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten, and says that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was "under massive pressure from the Arab world to open up his country's borders with Gaza, in order not to be perceived as Israel's stooge." Jerusalem wants to force Hamas to agree to a cease-fire, but the plan does not appear to be working out, the daily explains: "While exiled Hamas leader Khaled Mashal emphasized that no boycott could force Hamas to agree to a ceasefire, the reputation of the more moderate Arab leaders, Hosni Mubarak and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas included, is suffering continuously - they are being branded as Israeli collaborators." The whole affair, suggests commentator for the Salzburger Nachrichten Gil Yaron, is threatening to turn into a "propaganda victory for Hamas." Meanwhile, in mass-circulation tabloid Österreich, Middle East expert Udo Steinbach warns that -- like in 2006 - the situation in Gaza "is once again on the brink of escalation." The atmosphere "has become more radical. The determination to challenge Israel has increased. The Palestinians are increasingly feeling they are being marginalized, and the blockage of the past days has resulted in the people feeling there is nothing left to do for them but to try and open up the borders themselves." According to Steinbach, it is "not only Israel that has contributed to this radicalization, but the international community, which has been supporting Abbas and Fatah, as well." Although the majority of Palestinians is "no doubt fed up with the conflict, Gaza is in the hands of radical forces that are trying to mobilize other radicals in the entire Middle East," says Steinbach.

Financial Turmoil Overshadows Davos

15. Concerns about a possible global economic downturn remain high on the agenda at the annual Economic Forum currently underway in the Swiss mountain resort Davos. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice,

who tried to quell concerns about a lasting global crisis at the opening of the Forum, underscored that the "US economy is resilient, and its structures and long-term economic foundations are healthy." Austrian media agree, however, that despite her assurances, trust in the US financial system appears to have suffered considerably, even among leading economic and business representatives. Liberal daily Der Standard reports on the World Economic Forum currently underway in Davos, Switzerland and points out like all Austrian media that the financial markets' crisis and the threatening recession in the United States are the topics dominating the agenda at the conference. According to the daily it is the "pessimists, who are setting the tone in Davos." The daily quotes US investment banker George Soros, who predicted the "worst financial crisis since the end of WWII," and harshly criticized the central banks, suggesting they had "lost control." In an interview with the Standard, German business consultant Roland Berger argued the current turmoil will "have a marked impact on Austria as well." Austria, he suggests "will have to orient its business even more towards the east, and also reconsider Western Europe as a key market." However, "it is the end of the bonanza years for Austria, no doubt. I don't mean to say that Austria is badly off, but the big boost is over."

Crucial Vote For Prodi

16. Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi won a confidence vote on Wednesday in the Italian Lower House of Parliament, but faces an apparently insurmountable obstacle in the Upper House, the Senate, where a key ally's withdrawal of support for the government kicked off the current crisis. Prodi received 326 votes in favor and 275 against in the Lower House poll, which came a day ahead of the Senate vote scheduled for today. Should the Prime Minister lose the Senate vote, he would be forced to resign. In view of the likely outcome, Austrian media expect Prodi to hand in his resignation before the vote, thus avoiding having to face the almost certain loss in the Upper House.

Kilner